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The First Settlement in Mississippi

An Address Delivered at the

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Dedication of a Monument, Commemorating the
Settlement of Old Biloxi and Fort Maurepas

April 8, 1920

BY

DUNBAR ROWLAND, LL. D.

State Historian of Mississippi

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With the Compliments of the

MISSISSIPPI HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

DUNBAR ROWLAND,
Secretary.

The Capitol,

Jackson, Mississippi.

August 7, 1920.

BY
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State Historian of Mississippi

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OLD BILOXI, THE FIRST SETTLEMENT IN MISSISSIPPI

An address delivered on the occasion of the dedication of a monument commemorating the settlement of old Biloxi and Fort Maurepas, April 8, 1920, the two hundred and twenty-first anniversary of the first settlement in Mississippi.

Mr. Chairman, Daughters of the American Revolution, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me at the outset express to this impressive gathering of patriotic and State-loving Mississippians, who have joined hands with the Daughters of the American Revolution in celebrating our natal day, my deep appreciation of the courteous invitation to be present and to speak on this most interesting occasion. I assure you that I count it a high honor to have a place on your program. It gives me very real pleasure to also have this opportunity of expressing my sincere appreciation of the encouragement which you have always given the State Historical Department in the preservation and publication of the notable history which our forefathers made, and in creating and stimulating a true historical spirit throughout the State.

To the Daughters of the American Revolution of this State I wish to say that I congratulate you on your loving, well directed and effective efforts to keep alive in the hearts of this and future generations the deepest veneration for the patriot soldier of the American Revolution and for his great history. This has been your primary purpose, but you have not been unmindful of other historical activities. Your Society is the pioneer in the work of marking early historical sites in Mississippi. You have been busy in erecting memorials to commemorate the notable events in our history from the Tennessee line to these blue Gulf waters. Through your efforts travelers can follow the first great trail that brought us much of our early population, and we thank you in the name of the Historical Society for this evidence of your devotion to the high ideals that have placed us among the leading civilizations of the world.

But however important have been all other occasions in commemorating events in our history, the event which we have assembled here today to celebrate is the most important. On this beautiful Biloxi Bay, April 8, 1699, history chronicles its first fact in connection with the settlement of our State. It was here two hundred and twenty-one years ago that the adventurous and gallant spirits of France laid the foundation stones of what is now Mississippi, and established the capitol of a domain whose territory, according to the best authorities, covered that part of North America bounded on the south by the Gulf of Mexico, on the east by Carolina and part of Canada, on the west by New Mexico, on the north in part by Canada and extending as far as the unknown lands on Hudson Bay. It is no small honor to have been the seat of government of such a vast empire known as the Province of Louisiana which is sometimes referred to as Ancient Louisiana. It was often, too, in that far distant day called the Mississippi Country.

If I shall be able to present for your entertainment something of the historical importance and significance of this particular locality in the dawn of our history, the struggles that went on here for existence, and the establishment of a Christian civilization, if I can with you be stirred by its past romance, and feel the influence of its charm and poetic beauty, I shall return to my daily tasks with the keenest sense of a day well spent. And it is good for a people to sometimes have Red Letter Days of their own making.

When I speak of the historical import of this first colonizing effort in the history of the Lower South I do so with a full sense of its reality. We of the Southwest have ever been modest in claiming our rightful place in the colonial history of America, but we can with truth say that but for the founding of the Louisiana Province half of its history would never have been written. And the history of this entire Gulf Coast makes not only an important but a highly romantic and pleasant story. The romance that lingers here, the traditions that saturate and color its history, will ever throw about it a charm for all who breathe its atmosphere. That we see and cherish the beauty in the early fashioning of our civilization, and feel an epic force in

the story of our fathers as it leads from the wilderness to the farm, from the settlement to the city, and from outdoor worship to the temple is characteristic of the temperament of our people; that we have made so little of it in outward expression is a fact that we are just beginning to realize. But all of this goodly heritage belongs to us, is a part of us, and our story will only be half told if we fail to record it. The history of the exploration and colonization of this entire region is one of gripping fascination, and of all of that early company of pathfinders through the mighty waters and dim forests of America, none has left more stirring chapters in its history than the heralds who took their way through its vast interior or anchored their ships in its sunny harbor. Long before our northern shores had attracted the hardy seamen, the valley of the Great River had haunted their dreams of other worlds.

The springs of our civilization unlike those of Asia and Europe and Africa lie revealed. We can accurately trace the making of our civilization from the weak settlements of Jamestown, Plymouth Rock, Roanoke Island, Charleston, St. Augustine, Biloxi, Mobile, New Orleans and Natchez and other footholds that remain to remind us of the first spirits who laid the foundations in the civilization of this great Republic. In these bold and adventurous efforts to conquer and master an unknown continent inhabited by savage tribes three of the most powerful nations of Europe took the leading role. Their adventurous and indomitable seamen and soldiers, and ardent, faithful priests unveiled the secrets of an unknown world, occupied its primeval forests, traced and mapped out its streams, planted their Christian emblems, built their forts and claimed all things for their own. Their contention for the mighty prize was fierce and bitter, but the underlying current for world dominion by the fittest races went steadily on. Spain had won imperishable glory by the discovery of a Western Hemisphere, later England with her dogged determination and known aspiration for colonization soon possessed the Atlantic seaboard, France had occupied Canada and the Valley of the Great River was sought by all.

In the contest of these three great nations of Europe for the occupation and control of the Mississippi Valley, Spain slept on

her rights of discovery and exploration, and in 1682 France under the leadership of La Salle, took possession of the entire valley under the authority and in the name of Louis XIV., King of France, and it is to the bold daring and initiative of the French that we owe the beginning of civilized life in the Lower South. In our pride of Anglo-Saxon achievement we should not forget this, and in acknowledging our obligation to the French we feel grateful that in our infancy we were influenced by such a race, and that through it our institutions have felt the impress of the noblest form of civilization. In this connection may I express the satisfaction which I, in common with you, feel in the fact that we owe the founding of our State to the nation which produced Martel, Napoleon, Moliere, Hugo, Dumas, David, Lafayette, Joffre and Foch, and thousands of other spirits of a like nature. The blood of France is a blend of the Roman, the Gaul, the Celt, the Norman, the Iberian and Basque, and the qualities and characteristics of these great races have made the men and women of France a people of genius, culture, heroism and endurance, and the possessors of all other marvelous virtues known to men.

One of the great lessons that history teaches is that it is only when nations are animated by their highest ideals that they are sound in thought and deed, and their true story can always be traced in the ideals that control them. It is to her cherished ideals, her sentiment, her beneficent laws, her culture and aspiration and her love of liberty and justice—the eternal verities of her civilization, that France owes its preservation today. From the sacred heights of Verdun and from the consecrated fields of the Marne, she looks with steady eye and undaunted courage to the future. Noble Mother of a great, historic race! we salute her today and pay homage to her as one of the most faithful conservators of civilization. Since the time of Roland and his paladins beautiful, enduring France has been a supreme guardian of freedom and liberty among the races of the world. In our own time of trial when we were fighting for the eternal principles of freedom and self government, she stood by our side with sword and buckler and when dark days came upon her we sent our best and bravest to help her drive the foe from her sacred soil. Brothers we are and brothers we shall ever remain.

France in the fulfilment of her purpose to control and colonize the Mississippi Valley was fortunate in having at her call two masterful super-men, Robert Cavalier de la Salle, whose enduring fame lies in his voyage to the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1682 and Pierre le Moyne de Iberville, the great founder of the State of Mississippi. Of all the first colonizers of the New World none can surpass the founder of our State. Capt. John Smith and Miles Standish were small in ability and prowess in comparison with Iberville. He was the third of eleven sons of the brave Charles le Moyne, Seigneur of Longueil, Lower Canada, all of whom were distinguished soldiers of France. Born at Montreal, July 20, 1661, he entered the service of his country at an early age. In his life of our hero, Charles B. Reed has this to say: "Pierre le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville was the third and most interesting member of the remarkable Le Moyne family. From boyhood he was distinguished for his energetic and hardy spirit and his extraordinary force of character. As the children grew up, the family feeling became very strong, but all recognized and bowed to the qualities of leadership which Pierre possessed for he early showed his restless and monarchical disposition." He was said to be a proud, high spirited, impulsive lad, loyal to his brothers and friends and intensely patriotic. In a time and community which largely reflected such life he excelled in all rude sports and games. His biographer records that he was "resolute and ready to espouse a cause and having accepted an issue he, far more than his brothers, was willing, nay eager to pursue it to the bitter end." This latter quality, however, was very apparent in his younger brother Bienville in his punishment of the Indians when Governor of Old Biloxi. But powerful as these traits were in the brothers, Iberville was more romantic and was possessed of more personal magnetism and charm than Bienville and both the Biloxi and Natchez Indians were said to have greatly admired him. His biographer gives a charming picture of his youth when leading his brothers in all manly sports usual to pioneer life. "In his fortitude, endurance, courage and quick intelligence lay the claims of leadership which all accepted. Thus in warm emulation but definitely under his guidance, they hunted in pairs, and one or more of the brothers in an associated or subordinate capacity was found in

every expedition made by Iberville." Possessing qualities that made leaders of men, the le Moyne brothers impressed themselves upon their time and history, and were called and known as the Canadian Maccabees. Iberville is described as having even in youth a fine commanding figure. With dashing blue eyes and flowing tawny hair, he was a most perfect specimen of the French Canadian.

After completing his education in Canada Iberville was recommended by Frontenac, the Lieutenant-General and Governor of New France, for appointment as midshipman in the French navy. He was drilled for five years in all the naval science of the age which made him a highly accomplished officer. This was the beginning of a career the pursuit of which made him at the age of thirty-eight one of the great founders of Colonial America. To him belongs the unique distinction that he courted renown and carried to victory the banners of France upon each of the widely separated waters of Hudson Bay, the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Gulf of Mexico. After a brilliant career in the wars with England and Holland he returned to France in 1697 and was created a Knight of St. Louis in recognition of his eminent services.

During the visit to the Court of France Iberville took occasion to urge the necessity of prompt action in sending a fleet to the Gulf of Mexico to take possession and plant a colony in Louisiana which had been neglected since the death of La Salle in 1687. Accordingly orders were issued by Louis XIV. for the dispatch of an expedition of colonists to the Mississippi Country of which Iberville was given command with the title of Governor-General.

France was now to play her part in the great game of strategy with Spain and England for the control of the Mississippi Basin. Forts and settlements on the Lower Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico would provide Canada with a double outlet to the sea, and secure to France the free navigation of these important waters, and the English colonies on the Atlantic would be hemmed in between the great French possessions of Canada and Louisiana. It was an undertaking of the greatest en-

terprise and statesmanship. Spain, after two centuries of opportunity had failed to seize the control of the Lower Mississippi and had fastened her grasp only on the islands and mainland to the South. France, in actual possession of the coveted territory, could ignore her title based on early discoveries. The need of haste, however, was apparent. Spain was already in possession of the Bay of Pensacola and was engaged in establishing a colony there. To Iberville was given the great task of bringing to pass the dream which had filled the King's mind for years—to secure to France this garden spot of the world.

Without going into the details of Iberville's arrangements for accomplishing the great object he had in view we take up at once the important incidents of his voyage. His squadron set sail from Brest on the 24th of October, 1698. It was composed of two frigates each carrying thirty guns and two smaller vessels bearing about two hundred colonists and a company of marines. Among the colonists were many women and children, the families of the soldiers who had been offered liberal inducements to join the expedition. There were also farmers and mechanics and a full supply of provisions, and all necessary implements were provided. When they arrived in the bay called by the Spaniards Santa Maria de Galvez de Pensacola on January 28, 1699, they did not deem it prudent to remain in the harbor as two Spanish frigates were already there, and the Spaniards had been engaged four months in planting a colony. Iberville writes: "This is certainly a most beautiful port equal at least to that of Brest and has been lost to us by delay."

After exploring the Bay of Mobile and Dauphine, Horn and Dog Islands the squadron finally came to anchor in the harbor south of Ship Island which they called Surgeres in honor of one of the French commanders who discovered it. It was the intention of Iberville to locate his colony on the Mississippi River. He learned from the Biloxi Indians of a large river to the westward which they called the Malabouchia and inferring that it was the wonderful stream about which there had been so many strange stories, he decided to leave his vessels in safe anchorage and go in search of it. He thus describes the discovery of the mouth of the Mississippi: "At this moment we perceived a pass

between two banks which appeared like islands. We saw that the water had changed; tasted and found it fresh, a circumstance that gave us great consolation in that moment of consternation. Soon after we beheld the thick, muddy water. As we advanced we saw the passes of the river, three in number and the current of the stream was such that we could not descend it without difficulty although the wind was fair and favorable." He further records: "On Tuesday the 3rd, mass was performed and a Te Deum sung in gratitude for our discovery of the entrance of the Mississippi." He ascended the river one hundred leagues but failed to find a suitable location for his colony. Returning to Ship Island, he proceeded to explore the mainland in the vicinity of the island. He finally decided to locate the colony on an elevated site on the northeast shore of the Bay of Biloxi where there was a narrow channel of deep water leading to a safe and comfortable harbor between the mainland and an island, and extending back to a beautiful little bay.

A decision having been made the colonists went to work and cleared a place for the fort upon a strip of silvery sand among the beautiful live oaks and magnolias for which this coast is so famous. May I say by way of digression that I know of no coast in all the world where such beautiful trees grown down to the very water's edge. The plan of the fort was laid out and the work of erection begun, but the work went on too slowly for the impatient Iberville. The colonists were re-inforced by men from the crew and the boats were constantly busy carrying men and material while the people on shore dug, built and planted. At length the work which was begun on April 8, 1699, was completed on May 1, and named Fort Maurepas in honor of Count de Maurepas, Minister of Marine. In the meantime, the boats were actively engaged transporting the powder, guns and ammunition, as well as the live stock, such as cattle, hogs, turkeys and other fowls.

The fort was made with four bastions, two of them squared logs from two to three feet thick, placed one upon the other with embrasures for portholes and a ditch surrounding it. The other two bastions were stockaded with heavy timbers, it taking

four men to lift one of them. The fort was defended by twelve cannon.

The infant colony having been established Iberville sailed for France on May 3 to report the discovery of the mouth of the Mississippi, location of his colony and the general success of his undertaking. Sauvole and Bienville were left in command of the fort with a garrison of seventy men and boys.

Biloxi, as the settlement at Fort Maurepas was known in all correspondence, was founded at a time when France was the most powerful nation of Europe. Louis XIV. had reached the highest pinnacle of his brilliant reign. His word was law not only in France but in many of the surrounding nations. He was ambitious to extend his empire beyond the sea. He had been told that Louisiana had a climate like that of France where his thrifty people could engage in the same industries and lead the same life that they did at home. With two such leaders as Iberville and Bienville to carry out his plans he believed that his venture in the New World would be successful. With these hopes animating the mind of the king Biloxi was founded, and for sixty-four years France devoted herself to the settlement and development of Louisiana. The effort was attended by suffering, sorrow, famine and death. The story of every colonizing attempt in America is something the same. Biloxi experienced all the ills known to infant colonies. Sauvole, the gallant young commander, depressed and sick at heart by the many misfortunes that afflicted the colony, fell a victim to yellow fever and his ashes make sacred forever this soil. In despair at times the helpless handful strove to maintain themselves; seed planted promptly sprouted and then withered and died in the hot sun. Droughts came and burned up the sparse fields and gardens, and famine followed quickly. Water was so scarce that the streams dried up and great suffering from want of it ensued until a bountiful deep spring was finally discovered. Plagues of snakes were experienced and alligators were killed at the very gate of the fort. We cannot enumerate the privations and perils of the colonists. But it was also a life of romantic adventure and heroism and though their fortunes were battered, their stern spirits were never wholly baffled.

Having secured to the king and his country the great Valley of the Mississippi, Iberville determined to leave his brothers to guard and protect and develop the infant colony that he might make the claim of France more secure. Feeling that it was only a question of superior prowess as to whether England or France would dominate and become supreme in the New World, in a last great effort to crush the English, he gathered about him a splendid fleet and planned to attack every British stronghold between Charleston and Boston. But, alas, while at Havana preparing to go to sea once more, he was seized with a second attack of yellow fever and died July 9, 1706.

The administrative center of the colony remained at Old Biloxi until 1701, when the headquarters were transferred to Mobile Bay. About the year 1717, the harbor at Dauphine Island had become choked with sand and it was determined to make Ship Island the principal anchorage for ships from France and to erect a new fort upon the mainland opposite the island. The exact site of the new fort was one league west of Old Biloxi opposite the anchorage of Ship Island and the settlement was called New Biloxi and the fort called Fort St. Louis. In 1719, the capitol of the Mississippi Country was removed from Mobile back to Old Biloxi. On November 13, 1721, the capitol was removed to Fort St. Louis or New Biloxi where it remained until 1722 when headquarters were removed to New Orleans.

We have in the State Historical Department complete transcripts of the original French archives in the Ministry of the Colonies in Paris, concerning the dominion of France over Mississippi and Louisiana, from May 12, 1678, when the King of France gave his royal permission to La Salle to discover the western part of New France, to November 22, 1763, the date of a document which gives the plan and estimation of Fort Conde when given over to the English.

In course of time, the rivalry of France and England became so intense that they could no longer remain at peace in the occupation of North America. War was declared, France lost, and the great Louisiana Province east of the Mississippi by the treaty of 1763 became an English possession.

From 1699 to 1763, and even long after the English occu-

pation, French manners, customs and modes of life prevailed in Mississippi, with only such changes as the necessities of the situation required. The old records give a perfect picture of the official life of those in authority as well as of the daily life of the people. Governor Bienville writes to the Minister of the Colonies that the people are in distress for want of provisions and again that the soldiers are without clothing. It is recommended that cattle be sent to feed the people. In another letter of March 1, 1707, we have the complaint of a young French girl that Governor Bienville would not allow her to marry a young major of the French garrison. We are not advised that the officer eloped with his girl in defiance of such social and official tyranny, but if he was as gallant as the proverbial Frenchman, in all probability he did. The Minister of the Colonies is gravely informed, June 2, 1710, that "the Paris girls are a good-for-nothing lot," and that "farmer wives are wanted." It seems that they wanted "the files a la cossette" home-makers rather than dress models, two things for which France is rather famous.

We cannot honor too greatly the Le Moyne family, for to them is due the credit in the making of our earliest history, since all of this remarkable "brotherhood" were associated with the illustrious Iberville in the colonization of Louisiana, with the exception of Maricourt, who remained in Canada with his father. Bienville especially must be numbered among our heroes. For forty years, he served his country well and faithfully and laid the foundation for the Paris of America, in the historic old city of New Orleans. His remains rest in the beautiful cemetery of Montmartre. But it is to his illustrious brother, Iberville, warrior, conqueror, explorer, and colonizer that we must acknowledge our greatest indebtedness. His name will always light up the pages of French history in America. In the records of the first colonial possession of France in the newly discovered continent, he will always rank as the first great Canadian. In our own history, he will be revered throughout its annals as the founder of what has since become the State of Mississippi. While it bore for him the charmed name of Louis-

iana, it is pleasing to us to know that he too knew it as the Mississippi Country.

And now a word as to your future as a particular section of our great commonwealth. The waters that wash these shores are teeming with historical associations and inspiring traditions. Such glories as color your past are sure to make you a world-wide influence. The Panama Canal opens up to you a new gateway to the Pacific and the Orient and the commerce of the world is certain to include you in its grasp, and the captains of industry will look to you as one of the indispensable ports of the world. But giving these things full value in the story of your future, it is the irresistible charm of your history, enriched by a thousand romances of daring, constancy and courage, that fascinates the mind of those who study you and note in your present strength and achievement the subtle beauty of your past.

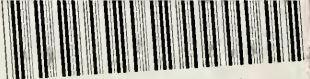
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